

Rev. King's assassin on his deathbed

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NASHVILLE — James Earl Ray, convicted assassin of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., lay in a coma yesterday as civil rights leaders held out hope for a deathbed confession confirming their long-held suspicions he did not act alone.

Ray, serving a 99-year prison sentence for the 1968 slaying, was in the last stages of cirrhosis of the liver despite never drinking or smoking, said his brother Jerry Ray. The 68-year-old convict was in critical condition.

Jerry Ray said he gave doctors permission not to try to resuscitate his brother if his heart stopped. "I think he'll be gone in 24 hours. I really do," Jerry Ray said.

There has long been speculation that Ray did not act alone, and civil rights leaders said they hoped that before he dies he'll tell everything he knows about the assassination.

"I think he would do a lot for his soul and his salvation if he confessed all that he knows before his lips are sealed forever," said the Rev. Joseph Lowery, who founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with King.

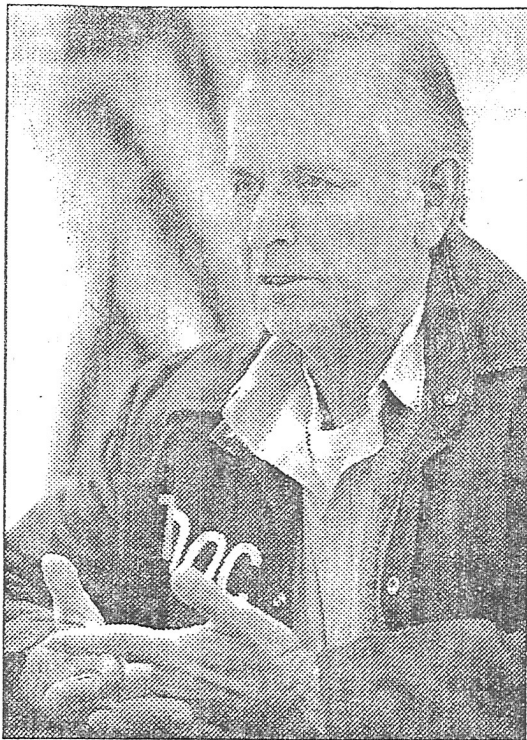
"I don't think he had the intelligence to plan, orchestrate and execute any such action. ... He may or may not know exactly who used him, but I think he knows more than he has revealed," Lowery said.

King was cut down by a sniper April 4, 1968, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where the civil rights leader had gone to support a strike by sanitation workers.

The assassination touched off race riots in more than 100 cities and set off one of the largest manhunts in U.S. history.

Ray, a white petty criminal, pleaded guilty but recanted three days later and had spent much of his time since then filing a barrage of appeals. He charged that he was set up by a man named Raoul whom he met in Montreal.

Ray had been serving his sentence at Riverbend Maximum-Security Prison in Nashville. He was transferred over the weekend from a prison medical hospital to Columbia Nashville Memorial Hospital.



ASSASSIN James Earl Ray, seen in 1991 at Nashville prison, is gravely ill with cirrhosis. The 68-year-old Ray is serving a 99-year sentence.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson and Georgia Rep. John Lewis are among the civil rights leaders who never accepted that Ray acted alone.

Jackson said he once visited Ray in prison to see for himself and came away more convinced than ever that Ray had help.

"It appears to me that James Earl Ray was a small cog in a big wheel," Jackson said.

"I think he was set up," said Hosea Williams, another King lieutenant. "I want to see him before he dies and I want to tell him, 'Don't feel too bad. They used you. A lot of people gave their life for Martin Luther King, but they took your life from you.'"